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CRITICAL NOTES.

DO WE NEED DOGMA?

THE answer to this question depends upon our view of what dogma really is. It is a most depressing reflection that two of the finest prophetic spirits of the century that has just closed have arrived at diametrically opposed conclusions on the subject of this paper. Martineau preaches an undogmatic Christianity, a spiritualized and Christianized theism; Newman knows no time when religion presented itself to him in any other guise save that of dogma. The former charges the latter with want of immediateness of religion, with failure to pierce to the primitive roots of faith, where, apart from any distracting media, the divine and human mingle; the Catholic, on the other hand, can scarce detect in the face of the Unitarian even a fugitive gleam of Christian light.

It is evident that our ideas about dogma need to be cleared up. As a provisional attempt to meet this necessity, let us ask: (1) What is dogma? (2) How does it stand related to religion? (3) What of its future?

1. *What is dogma?*—Harnack's view, as is well known, is that it is the scientifically formulated expression of belief, considered as having behind it the authority of divine revelation, and imposed by the church as necessary to salvation. More particularly, it is an amalgam of the original teaching of Jesus with Greek metaphysics made by the church into a belief binding on all men on pain of eternal loss. If this theory be sound, then—*quaestio cadit*. Christian dogma is not truth springing immediately out of the inner essence of the religion of Christ, but rather, as Pfeleiderer says, a progressive obscuration of the truth, a progress of disease in the church produced by the sudden irruption of Hellenic philosophy and other secularizing influences. In so far as dogma merits Harnack's description it stands self-condemned and intellectually bankrupt. What, then, is dogma? An analysis of the idea will be found to yield three elements: (a) truth to be believed; (b) the reasoned form or articulated expression of the truth; (c) the authority which imposes the dogma. Now, in the sense of truth to be believed, it is clear that all thinking men, whether they call them-

selves dogmatists or anti-dogmatists, have dogmas. Emerson and Carlyle are theologically most undogmatic, yet the calm and serene optimism of the one, the troubled and turbulent pessimism of the other, rest on dogmas backed up by the sternest sanctions. Not here, then, is the quarrel with theology. Nor should there be much dispute about the second point, at least among those who have gained the modern intellectual standpoint. All genuine Christian dogma can lay no claim to infallibility, because it is not the absolute, unadulterated truth of God; rather is it the truth refracted and colored by the human media of reflection, reason, elaboration, through which it passes. Every expression of the Christian faith incloses within itself what Coleridge calls "a transcendent element," an inscrutable residuum that defies the analytical understanding, however subtle and penetrating. Hence it follows that all dogma must be imperfect, fragmentary, and relative. But it is when we hit upon the idea of authority that the crux of modern contention comes into view. The popular notion is that dogma is differentiated from all other kinds of truth in that it appeals, not to reason, but to authority, whether embodied in the church, or in the early Fathers, or in the *ipsissima verba* of the Bible. But were any one of these theories sound, then, paradoxical as it may seem, our theology would rest on a philosophical skepticism which would cast discredit alike on the inherent and convincing sovereignty of divine truth and on the moral reason of man. It is one of the curious and pathetic weaknesses of a certain type of mind that it feels as though there was a serious risk in allowing truth, robbed of all external supports, in its bare and naked essence, to stand face to face with the human spirit. The soul is so weak, or depraved, or distorted by prejudice that some coercive power must be summoned to reinforce the energies of truth, to engift it with something of the compulsory quality of a scientific generalization. Is not this to forget that it is only in the lower and less important spheres of truth that demonstrative certainty is gained; that, the higher we go, our certitude depends on our apprehension of our moral and spiritual needs, and on our attitude toward the objects of faith? The authority which lies behind dogma, then, is ethical and inward. The divine revelation is not something fixed in stark and rigid outline to be imposed on the intellect by any authority, ecclesiastical or other; it is a living process whose grandest products may be found in Holy Scripture — a process which for us culminates in the person and work of Christ who offers himself to each succeeding age for fresh interpretation, for a profounder

apprehension of the saving message which he has brought into the world. But it may be said, in thus depriving dogma of all authority from without and simply leaving it alone with the individual consciousness, are you not cutting religion loose from its moorings and sending it adrift on a boundless sea of speculative doubt and uncertainty ? If there be no organum of truth, no court of appeal by which this or that dogma can have its claims tested, approved or disapproved, does it not follow that skepticism is as justifiable as faith, and religion resolves itself into a play of subjective fancies which have no footing in reality ? Now, such a court of appeal exists, and is indeed the only genuine doctrinal standard. The ultimate standard in religious matters is the religious consciousness in which all men share, enlightened, penetrated, and shaped by the teaching of Christ in the gospels, in the history of the church, and in the illuminating influences of his spirit. Each age has its own vision of Christ. He grows in the individual soul ; he also grows in the soul of an age. Before his bar all dogmas must be arraigned. Whatever stands the criticism of an age formed by the vision of Christ, justifies its right to be ; all else is temporary and accidental.

2. *What is the relation of dogma to religion?*—Dogma is not religion ; theology is not faith. “Not the astronomical system,” says Schleiermacher, “but the glance directed to the starry heavens is the highest and most appropriate symbol of religious contemplation.” Religious intuition grasps truth as a whole ; dogmatic reflection analyzes it, dissects it into its component parts, and seeks to show the links of connection, the inner consistency, that binds them into a unity. In this process of reflection a certain element is lost—the infinitude in which the experience of faith lives, moves, and has its being. The popular mind, confounding theology with some given traditional system, the incompetence of which to embody adequately Christian experience it vividly feels, falls into the misconception that dogma is inimical to religious freedom, and in the interests of faith denounces systematic thinking about divine truth. Herein lies an antinomy of the religious life. Dogma can never fully express the contents of the life, yet must ever seek to do so. Here as elsewhere the schoolmen’s maxim is true : *Omnia exeunt in mysterium*. Though a final dogmatic can never be reached, yet are we compelled by a necessity of nature ever afresh to attempt the task. Why ? Because it is an absolute demand made upon us in the interests of the integrity of our moral and intellectual life ; it satisfies our reflective needs. We cannot rest in religious

impressions merely ; we must ask : Do they point to a spiritual reality as their origin and goal ? The answer is dogma. The impression which Christ makes upon us is at first so overwhelming that all curious thoughts are lost in spiritual rapture, but reflection awakes later and asks : Who is this Christ ? and the answer, in whatever form, is dogma. Every attempt to cut religion from its metaphysical roots has proved and must forever prove abortive. Whether it be Kant's moral law in the conscience as the voice of heaven, or Fichte's subjective mysticism, or Jacobi's faith as an inward sense of the divine presence in the heart, or Ritschl's historical realism which confines us to experience, but permits no question as to its ultimate validity, we are doomed to a dualism that cuts to the foundations of our rational life, and we can but echo the despair of Jacobi who felt himself by turns pagan and Christian. Further, we have moral and practical as well as reflective needs. Popular religion, with its revivals, conventions, evangelistic activities, and so forth, is a prey to weakness and folly simply because it is without the guiding and directing influence of theology. With the exercise of reason in religion there comes a certain largeness and balance of mind which acts as a preservative against a shallow sentimentalism or an acrid fanaticism. History teaches that every great and permanent spiritual uplift of humanity has been the fruit of noble ideas working like a ferment in the spirit of the age. And if our generation is to be saved from the impotence of despair in face of the grave intellectual problems set it for solution—the difficulties raised by an agnostic *Weltanschauung*, on the one hand, and by the pressure of sociological study, on the other—it can only be by a doctrine large, rich, generously human, which, while not breaking in revolutionary wantonness with the past, will yet prove loyal to the supreme claims of the present.

3. *What of the future of dogma?*—For the traditionalist and the agnostic alike there is none ; to the mind of the former, theology is a fixed quantity, eternally unchangeable ; its existence is a death-in-life ; in the view of the latter, it is slowly but surely advancing to the grave dug to receive it. Neither position will stand the test of criticism. It is sufficient to reply to the traditionalist that, however divine the content of theology may be, as a science it is earthly and makes advance like all earthly forms of knowledge from less to more adequate conceptions and principles. But the agnostic, by a curious myope, sees in every advance of religious thought a sign of disintegration, decay, and death. The supreme reality is the unknowable, and as religion

professes to know what cannot be known, it is to be rejected as a colossal imposition. Now that agnosticism has been shown to be incapable of statement without involving a contradiction in thought, religion is coming to its own, and theology is free to reveal God as the living Father of spirits made in his image and crowned with immortal hopes. Even Huxley toward the end of his career uttered a kind of palinode in his famous *Romanes* lecture, in which a protest was made against the de-spiritualizing of man, and the lecturer, as a reviewer said, "made an approximation to the Pauline dogma of nature and grace." Materialism, which threatened a few years ago to swamp the spiritual life of man, is now everywhere discredited. When, in the hands of men like Green and Dr. Caird, matter itself is subjected to critical examination, it is discovered that there is not an element in it, or aspect of it, which is not dependent throughout on spiritual conditions; the apparently invincible dualism of matter and spirit has been resolved; spirit has come off victorious and is disclosed as the only and ultimate reality. Historical criticism, too, which has done so much to purge theology of accidental accretions, has also contributed very materially to its substance and strength. It used to be said that our knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth was very dubious, that it was impossible to discover what he really did say and do, and how much that is attributed to him is the embroidery of the various factions which formed the primitive communities. Whether he ever prayed the Lord's Prayer, or delivered the Sermon on the Mount, has been declared exceedingly doubtful. It is a reassuring reflection that now, after the critical labors of such men as Wendt, Weiss, Weizsäcker, and Harnack among the German, and of Hort, Westcott, Sanday, and Bruce among the British divines, this agnostic despair of history is no longer possible. Professor Harnack being witness, the fire of criticism has failed to dissolve such facts as these: (1) that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, (2) that the Logos doctrine of John is not borrowed from Philo, (3) that the supernatural cannot be eliminated from the records without destroying them. These positions established, consequences flow from them in the light of which we see theology to be, not, as some think, a more or less dexterous manipulation of abstract notions, but a sympathetic interpretation of the realities of history. They give a fulcrum for the constructive endeavor which is the mighty task the new century imposes on Christian piety and scholarship.

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